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ABSTRACT

The vocational education and training (VET) outcomes of Australian school-leavers were examined. School non-completers identified in the 1995 national cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) were tracked annually from 1995, and their school experiences, educational attainment, and postschool participation in education, training, and work were recorded. Information was collected from LSAY respondents regarding their participation in VET and supplemented with data from the national VET provider data collection managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research. The study focused on the VET activities and achievement of school noncompleters in the initial years beyond high school (roughly to age 19). Special attention was paid to the effects of the following factors: gender; early school achievement; school type; ethnicity; indigenous status; geographic location; socioeconomic status; parents' education; median household income; proximity to a technical and further education institute; and unemployment rate of resident locality. The results suggested that the VET sector is meeting the needs of the group of non-completers who are in trade-related apprenticeships or Australian Qualifications Framework certificate level III courses. Non-completers who were low achievers at school and those who were from low socioeconomic backgrounds were the least likely to participate in VET. (MN)

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School non-completers: outcomes in vocational education and training

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Not all young people continue on at school to complete year 12. While many of those who drop out of school do not undertake any further formal education and training, others participate in further education and training, enrolling in a post-school vocational education and training (VET) course through adult and community education, state technical and further education (TAFE) systems or private providers.

School non-completers identified in the 1995 (Y95) national cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) have been tracked annually from 1995 and their school experiences, educational attainment, and post-school participation in education, training and work have been recorded. In this study, the information collected on participation in VET from LSAY respondents has been supplemented with data from the national VET provider data collection managed by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER).

This study examines the VET activities and achievement of school non-completers in the initial years beyond high school (roughly to age 19). Trends for school non-completers in VET between 1996 and 1998 suggest significant differences in achievement across gender, socioeconomic status and ethnicity.

This study provides information about the VET choices and progress in VET of school non-completers. The research suggests that the vocational education and training sector is playing an important role in the transition from school to working life for young people who do not remain on at school to complete year 12.

School non-completers: outcomes in vocational education and training

Despite attempts to raise school retention through increasing subject choice and initiatives such as VET in Schools, the reality is that not all young people will complete senior secondary school. It is widely recognised that non-completers experience the most difficulty in making the transition from school to productive activities in adulthood - post-school education, training and employment. This has led to particular concern over the group of young people who fail to complete school. For those who do not re-enter education and training, there are long-term costs involved for individuals, government and society. Without further education and training, school non-completers are entering the labour market with insufficient education and skills to be successful in the long term.

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A key response has been to strengthen the range of education and training options available to non-completers, particularly through the expansion of VET, and to increase the incentives to participate through changes to income support arrangements for those in education and training and for those out of work. But how many non-completers take part in further education and training? What VET modules and courses do they undertake? How well do they achieve?

This study highlights the range of courses being studied by school non-completers in the VET sector and the differences in achievement according to a range of demographic factors. Understanding the VET choices and achievement of non-completers will help the development of a better understanding of the role that VET plays in providing post-school education and training for school non-completers.

Who are non-completers?

In the current study, the term 'non-completer' is used to refer to those who do not finish year 12, even if they have continued beyond the 'compulsory' years.
Other research suggests that students do not complete school for a variety of reasons. There is a group of students for whom continuing on at school has the potential to be counterproductive if it changes neutral feelings about learning into negative ones (Dwyer 1996).

These varied school non-completers will leave school at different times up to the end of year 12. They will have a variety of educational backgrounds and therefore diverse further education and training needs.

Data and method

The analyses are based on the non-completers identified in the 1995 (Y95) cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). This data set has tracked a national cohort of year 9 students annually from 1995 and has mapped school experiences, educational attainment and post-school participation in education, training and work. The information collected from the annual Y95 follow-up survey has been matched with data from the 1996, 1997 and 1998 national VET provider data collections to develop a detailed profile of the vocational education and training experiences of non-completers. LSAY provides information on broad measures of participation in VET. The national VET provider data collections contain more detailed information on qualification, field of study, courses, module enrolments and module achievement. Together the two data sets provide extensive information on the VET experiences of non-completers from the Y95 cohort. The research results are reported in full in Ball and Lamb (forthcoming).

Results

Who participates in VET?

Details on VET participation by school non-completers are presented in Table 1. During the period they would otherwise have been at school, roughly two out of every five non-completers participated in alternative forms of education and training. Two-thirds of the VET participants were male because 42% of boys who did not complete school had participated in VET at some time before age 19

compared with only 30% of girls. Therefore, while relatively more girls than boys remained on at school, more boys than girls participated in VET at this time.

There was only a slight tendency for higher school achievers among the non-completers to participate in some form of VET. School achievement is based on literacy and numeric tests taken during year 9. Because of the differences in rates of non-completion, the lowest school achievers made up 37% of the non-completers who participated in VET compared to only 14% of high achievers.

School type was also related to participation in VET. The highest rate of participation from non-completers in VET was for those from Catholic schools. The rate - 44% - was 8 points higher than for those from government schools and 13 points higher than for young people from independent non-Catholic schools. This means that much higher percentages of young people in Catholic schools are participating in some form of further education or training during the post-compulsory years.

Young people from a non English-speaking background are more likely to complete school than those from an English-speaking background. Teenagers who did not complete school were more likely to enrol in a VET course if they had parents born in Australia rather than in another English-speaking country or in a non English-speaking country. Some 39% of all non-completers with Australian-born parents enrolled in a VET course. In comparison, 35% of non-completers with parents born in non English-speaking backgrounds and 30% of non-completers with parents born in other English-speaking countries entered a VET course.

Proportionately fewer non-completers from Indigenous backgrounds enrolled in a VET course compared to other Australians. About 28% of Indigenous non-completers enrolled in a VET course compared to 38% of non-Indigenous non-completers.

Table 1: Participation in VET of non-completers, by selected background characteristics

	Row percentages			Column percentages		
Characteristic	Did not participate in VET	Participated in VET	Total	Did not participate in VET	Participated in VET	Total
Gender						
Males	58	42	100	54	66	58
Females	70	30	100	46	34	42
Early school achievement						
Lowest	64	36	100	39	37	38
Lower middle	63	37	100	30	30	30
Upper middle	62	39	100	18	19	18
Highest	61	39	100	13	14	13
School type						
Government	64	36	100	88	86	87
Catholic	56	44	100	9	12	10
Independent non-Catholic	69	31	100	3	2	3
Ethnicity* **						
Australian-born	61	39	100	84	88	85
Other-English	70	30	100	9	6	8

Non English-speaking	63	35	100	7	6	7
Indigenous status						
Indigenous	72	28	100	6	4	5
Non-Indigenous	62	38	100	94	96	95
Geographic location						
Urban	65	35	100	43	39	42
Regional	65	35	100	32	29	31
Rural or remote	56	44	100	24	32	27
Socioeconomic status						
Lowest	65	35	100	36	31	34
Lower middle	62	38	100	30	30	30
Upper middle	60	40	100	19	21	20
Highest	57	43	100	15	19	16
Parents' education						
Lowest (did not complete school)	69	31	100	3	2	3
Lower middle (school certificate)	64	36	100	45	42	44
Upper middle (post-school qual)	58	42	100	32	39	34
Highest (university degree)	66	34	100	21	17	19
Median household income*						
$399.50	58	42	100	23	27	25
$599.50	62	38	100	43	42	43
$849.50	66	34	100	31	28	29
$1249.50	48	52	100	3	5	4
Proximity to a TAFE institute						
Less than 2 kms	67	33	100	36	29	34
Between 2 and 10 kms	59	41	100	45	50	47
Over 10 kms	59	41	100	18	21	19
Unemployment rate of residential locality						
Less than 6 %	58	42	100	17	20	18
Between 6 and 10 %	63	37	100	46	44	45
Between 10 and 14 %	58	42	100	20	23	21
Over 14 %	66	33	100	17	13	16
Total (Sample size)				*1302*	*763*	*2065*
(%)				*63*	*37*	*100*

Living in a rural area is not an impediment to participation in VET. While rural students may complete school less often than their urban counterparts, they more often enrol in VET. The rate of participation in VET among rural and remote non-completers was 44%, compared to 35% for those in regional and urban centres.

Variations in VET participation were also linked to social background and locality. Non-completers from high socioeconomic backgrounds were more often VET participants. Despite much lower rates of non-completion, those from high socioeconomic backgrounds more often entered some form of further education and training in the initial post-school years. Non-completers from areas of high unemployment (over 15%) were less likely to participate in vocational education and training than their counterparts.

What courses are studied?

The majority of non-completers were enrolled in trade-related courses. About 12% were doing a preparatory trade course, while 31% were enrolled in a full trade course. A further 24% were enrolled in non-trade certificate courses, with one-third of this group in preparatory or qualifying certificate courses.

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There were gender differences in the course enrolments. About 57% of boys enrolled in a trade-related course, usually at AQF level III, compared to 18% of girls. Girls were more likely to enrol in courses which teach other skills, usually at Certificate II level. About 42% of girls had enrolled in either a preparatory course which grants partial exemption to non-trade skills courses or in a recognised complete course teaching non-trade skills. The equivalent rate for boys was 15%.

About one in ten girls and boys enrolled in courses that teach either 'basic education and employment skills' or 'education preparation'. Boys tended to favour the courses providing basic education and employment skills while girls favoured the courses in education preparation.

There are differences in the courses that boys and girls enrol in depending upon whether they leave school before, or after, the start of year 11. About half of all boys who left school in year 10 or below enrolled in a complete trade course compared with a third of those who left school in year 11. Boys were more likely to enrol in a 'complete non-trade skills' course if they left school in year 11. Girls who left school in year 10 or below were more likely to enrol in 'education preparation' courses compared to girls who started senior secondary school.

There are notable differences in the field of study for girls and boys. The most popular choice of fields of study for boys were 'engineering and surveying', followed by 'architecture and building' and 'services, hospitality and transportation'. This contrasted with girls who enrolled primarily in 'services, hospitality or transportation' and 'business, administration and economics' courses.

Influences on course choice

Over half of the students who were high achievers at school and left school in year 10 or below were enrolled in 'complete trades courses', compared with only a quarter of students who had lower levels of school achievement. A further 20% of high achievers were enrolled in 'complete other skills courses'. There were no marked differences in the courses studied by teenagers who left school in year 11 by school achievement.

Proportionately more students from disadvantaged backgrounds studied 'basic education and employment skills' courses compared with students from families with a higher socioeconomic status.

Proportionately more students who were from a non English-speaking background studied 'courses which grant partial exemption to recognised trade courses' than students who were born in English-speaking countries. Proportionately fewer students from a non English-speaking background studied 'complete other skills courses' compared with students from an English-speaking background.

Almost two in five non-completers in VET living in urban areas were studying 'complete trades courses'. Less than a third of students living in regional or rural and remote localities were enrolled in these courses. A higher proportion of students who live in rural and remote localities were enrolled in 'initial vocational courses' or 'other complete skills courses' compared with students from regional or urban areas.

Achievement in VET modules

The unit of analysis for analysing VET achievement is the module, or subject, rather than the individual. The information was compiled on each module studied by a non-completer in the sample, rather than on the average outcome achieved by each student. This means that it is possible to provide estimates of the numbers and types of modules non-completers were successful in, but not the numbers of non-completers who were successful. The module outcomes identified in the national VET provider collection have been grouped into the categories of successful outcome, non-successful outcome and not yet completed.

- Successful outcome: pass and no assessment - satisfactory completion of class hours
- Non-successful outcome: fail, withdrew (failed) and withdrew (without failure)
- Not yet completed: no assessment - studies not yet completed, and result withheld.

Overall rates of success and failure

Not all non-completers are successful in their VET studies. A successful outcome was achieved in 59% of modules undertaken by non-completers, which were either passed (46%) or satisfactorily completed (13%). One in four modules (29%) did not result in a successful outcome. Approximately 17% of modules undertaken by non-completers resulted in outright failure. A further 8% were withdrawn from but with participants being recorded as having failed, and 8% of modules were withdrawn from without a failure recorded. A further 12% of modules were not completed either because the result was withheld or the studies were continuing.

Choice of course and module outcomes

There were differences in module outcomes for non-completers depending upon the type of course studied in VET. With the exception of recreational or personal enrichment courses, the results show that a slightly higher percentage of modules in trade-related courses were successfully completed by non-completers compared with modules in other types of courses. Non-successful outcomes and withdrawal from modules in trade-related courses were also lower than for other courses. A relatively low proportion of enrolments in trade-related courses resulted in a withdrawal. Conversely, a relatively high proportion of module enrolments in courses related to 'other skills' resulted in a fail grade. A high proportion of enrolments in basic skills and education preparation courses resulted in a withdrawal with a failure recorded.

Qualification category and module outcomes

The degree of difficulty of a VET course influenced the module outcomes of non-completers. Although relatively few non-completers enrolled in a diploma-level course, a high proportion of fail grades (29%) were recorded in modules at this level. Conversely, relatively high pass rates were recorded in module enrolments at AQF level III and IV or equivalent. These courses are likely to be apprenticeship courses. A high proportion of modules for courses leading to a statement of attainment resulted in a withdrawal with a fail grade recorded.

The highest pass rate was achieved in modules studied in 'other certificate courses' (71%). These courses most often include short courses providing basic education skills training and initial vocational preparation.

School attainment and module outcomes

Despite differences in course choice, students who left school in year 10 or below and students who left in year 11 were equally likely to achieve a successful outcome or an unsuccessful outcome in a VET module. However, the distribution of course results differed depending upon whether students left school before or after commencing year 11.

Gender

Overall, male non-completers are more likely than female non-completers to achieve a successful outcome in a VET module. A successful outcome was recorded in 62% of modules studied by male non-completers compared with 57% of modules studied by females. Only 27% of modules studied by male non-completers resulted in a non-successful outcome compared with 31% of modules studied by female non-completers.

There are also differences between female and male non-completers in the propensity to withdraw from a vocational education and training course. Females withdrew from a higher percentage of modules than males. Irrespective of whether or not a 'fail' grade was recorded, females were more likely than males to withdraw from their VET course.

Early school achievement

Irrespective of differences in the types of VET modules undertaken by non-completers who were high achievers in school and those who were in the lowest quartile of achievers, the proportion of modules where a successful outcome was achieved were comparable (61%) and pass rates were rather similar (about 47%).

Although the proportion of non-completers who recorded a non-successful outcome was similar across the quartiles of school achievement, module failure was higher in the modules entered by low school achievers. About 17% of the modules entered by low achievers were failed. The rate for high modules undertaken by high achievers was 14%.

Withdrawal rates were higher in modules undertaken by high achievers.

Socioeconomic status

Although lower numbers of non-completers are from families of high socioeconomic status (SES), more of them, on average, tend to record a successful outcome or a pass in their VET studies. About 63% of modules were successfully completed of all modules studied by students from the highest quartile of SES compared to 59% for those in the lowest quartile of SES, who make up the largest group of non-completers.

More striking is the difference in non-successful outcomes and failure rates. About 30% of non-completers from a low SES background recorded a non-successful outcome and non-completers from low SES backgrounds were much more likely to

fail outright - 19% of modules were failed compared to 13% of modules undertaken by non-completers from high SES families.

Social background exerts an influence in terms of rates of non-completion and rates of participation in VET, and also in terms of the likelihood of achieving a successful outcome or a non-successful outcome for those undertaking VET modules.

Parents' country of birth

There was a notable difference in the proportion of non-completers who did not achieve a successful outcome from a non English-speaking background compared to other non-completers. Rates of non-successful outcomes were higher and rates of successful outcomes lower in modules undertaken by non-completers with parents from non English-speaking countries compared with students from other backgrounds. Approximately 57% of modules undertaken by non-completers from non English-speaking backgrounds were successfully completed, compared to 60% of those undertaken by other non-completers.

Module failure and withdrawal rates were higher in modules undertaken by non-completers from non English-speaking backgrounds.

Urban or rural location

There were minor differences in the rate of successful outcomes across different geographical regions. However, a higher proportion of non-completers from rural and remote localities recorded a non-successful outcome (31%) compared to other non-completers - 26% for non-completers from regional localities and 28% for those from urban areas. There was a higher rate of module failure for non-completers living in rural and remote locations than for those from urban areas - 18% of modules undertaken by non-completers in rural or remote locations; 17% in regional centres compared to 14% in urban areas.

Conclusions

The results of this analysis suggest that VET is meeting the needs of the group of non-completers who are in trade-related apprenticeships or other AQF certificate level III courses. This group of non-completers are achieving successful outcomes in the VET modules they are studying. Of concern are the groups of non-completers who were low achievers at school or are from low SES backgrounds, who are not succeeding in VET. In addition, high proportions of non-completers from these groups are not participating in VET.

These groups are the least likely to participate in VET, despite having the highest needs for education and training in order to make a successful transition to employment. For those who do engage in VET, they tend to enrol in the least demanding of courses and are the groups that are most likely to experience failure.

These results present a challenge to VET providers and practitioners as they imply that much more needs to be done to assist reluctant learners to participate and succeed in VET courses that will prepare them for the labour market. It is important that VET remains flexible and continues to provide diversity in the range of courses available to cater for the varied needs of school non-completers.

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